

THE DE THORP TOMB AT ASHWELLTHORPE

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OF the 342 pre-Reformation alabaster tombs in England listed by Arthur Gardner,¹ only two are in Norfolk. The earlier of these is in the church at East Harling; but only the effigies of knight and lady survive, mounted now on the tomb of Sir Robert Harling who died in 1435. The *camail* and *jupon* of the knight and the elaborately folded *nebuly* head-dress of the lady show that they belong to the last decades of the fourteenth century; and the unicorn² carved in low relief on the *jupon* shows that this knight was also a member of the Harling family—perhaps the father or grandfather of Sir Robert. These effigies are older than the present church, which was largely rebuilt about 1450 by Sir Robert's daughter Anne³ and her first husband, Sir William Chambers. The original tomb chest may have been destroyed at the time of the rebuilding, though this seems an unlikely fate for a memorial family tomb then scarcely half a century old; more probably it was removed to make way for the big Lovell tombs of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The only complete alabaster tomb of the period in Norfolk is in Ashwellthorpe church, and is that of Sir Edmund de Thorp and his second wife Joan, daughter of Sir Robert de Northwood and widow of Lord Scales (his first wife was Margaret, daughter of Richard de la Riviere). The two figures lie upon the original alabaster tomb chest, though this has suffered some mutilation and its west end is now of stone. The figures are largely intact, but most of Sir Edmund's sword is gone and both figures have suffered severely at the hands of initial-scratching vandals from the early eighteenth century almost to the present day.

This Sir Edmund was the son of Sir Edmund de Thorp and Joan Baynard, daughter and heiress of Robert Baynard. He was killed in 1417 or 1418 at the siege of the castle at Louviers in Normandy ("Lovers' Castle" as Farrer⁴ has it). His effigy is in an armour of the transitional phase between the *camail* and *jupon* of the East Harling knight and the full "Lancastrian" plate armour of Sir Simon de Felbrigg's well-known brass in Felbrigg church.

Sir Edmund had no son, but two daughters survived him. The elder, Joan, married (first) Robert Echingham and (second) Sir John Clifton of New Buckenham Castle. The younger, Isobel, married Phillip Tilney of Boston in Lincolnshire, who, after her death in 1436, became a monk at Lincoln and died there in 1453.

Round the flat conical *bascinet* on Sir Edmund's head is an elaborately carved *orle* or wreath, the practical purpose of which was to act as padding when he wore the great tilting helm on which, as in all knightly monuments of the period, his head is resting. Shaped steel plates protect the back and sides of his head between the *bascinet* and the *gorget* of steel resting on the

shoulders and guarding the neck; and below this can be seen the edges of the *camail* of chain mail surviving from the earlier form.

The mail *hauberk* which covers his body from shoulder to thigh shows in the armpits and below the elaborately scalloped edge of the leather *jupon*. The arms and legs are encased in plate, shoulders, elbows and knees are protected by hinged overlapping plates—*pauldrons*, *elbow-cops* and *poleyns*.⁵ The joints of the armour on the arms and legs are enriched by narrow bands of ornament, and round his hips he wears the elaborately jewelled belt which carried the *misericorde*, or dagger. His sword was carried on a separate belt, the *bawdric*, sloping from waist level on the right down to the left hip. His feet, encased in long pointed *sollerets* of overlapping plates, rest upon a hound, while a smaller dog plays with the hem of his lady's skirt—a device which so long remained popular that it is to be found, for example, in the Harrington tomb of c. 1524 at Exton in Rutland.

Lady Thorp's hair style must surely be one of the ugliest ever invented. The hair is gathered into two *cauls*, projecting horizontally to each side of the head and encased in elaborate netting; over them, and covering the back of the head, is a veil held in place on top of the head by a wreath carved to represent a trailing vine. Her head rests on cushions supported by angels, a device already long popular which, like the dog at her feet, was to survive into the sixteenth century and is also to be seen in the Harrington tomb at Exton.

The great helm under Sir Edmund's head is surmounted by his crest of a *panache* of peacock feathers rising from a *crest coronet*. The front of his *jupon* is carved in low relief with his arms of Thorp (azure three crescents argent) quartering Baynard (sable a fess between two chevrons or). Both knight and lady wear the Lancastrian "Collar of Esses", the origin of which is not known with certainty; and each of them has on one shoulder a clasp in the form of an eagle displayed, *gorged* with a coronet. This clasp may represent some favour granted to them, rather than a family badge.

The tomb chest has on each side four recessed rectangular panels, each containing an angel bearing a shield of arms. The blazons of these shields are given by Farrer as:—

- (1) Azure three crescents argent—*Thorp*—quartering sable, a fess between two chevrons or—*Baynard*.
- (2) *Northwood*—Ermine, a cross engrailed gules, in the first quarter three bars of the second.
- (3) *Clifton*—Chequy or and gules, a bend ermine.
- (4) *Barrey*—Argent, a chevron between three boars' heads coupéd sable, muzzled or.
- (5) *Calthorpe*—Chequy or and azure, a fess ermine.
- (6) *Kerdeston*—Gules, a saltire engrailed argent.
- (7) *St. George*—Argent, a cross gules.

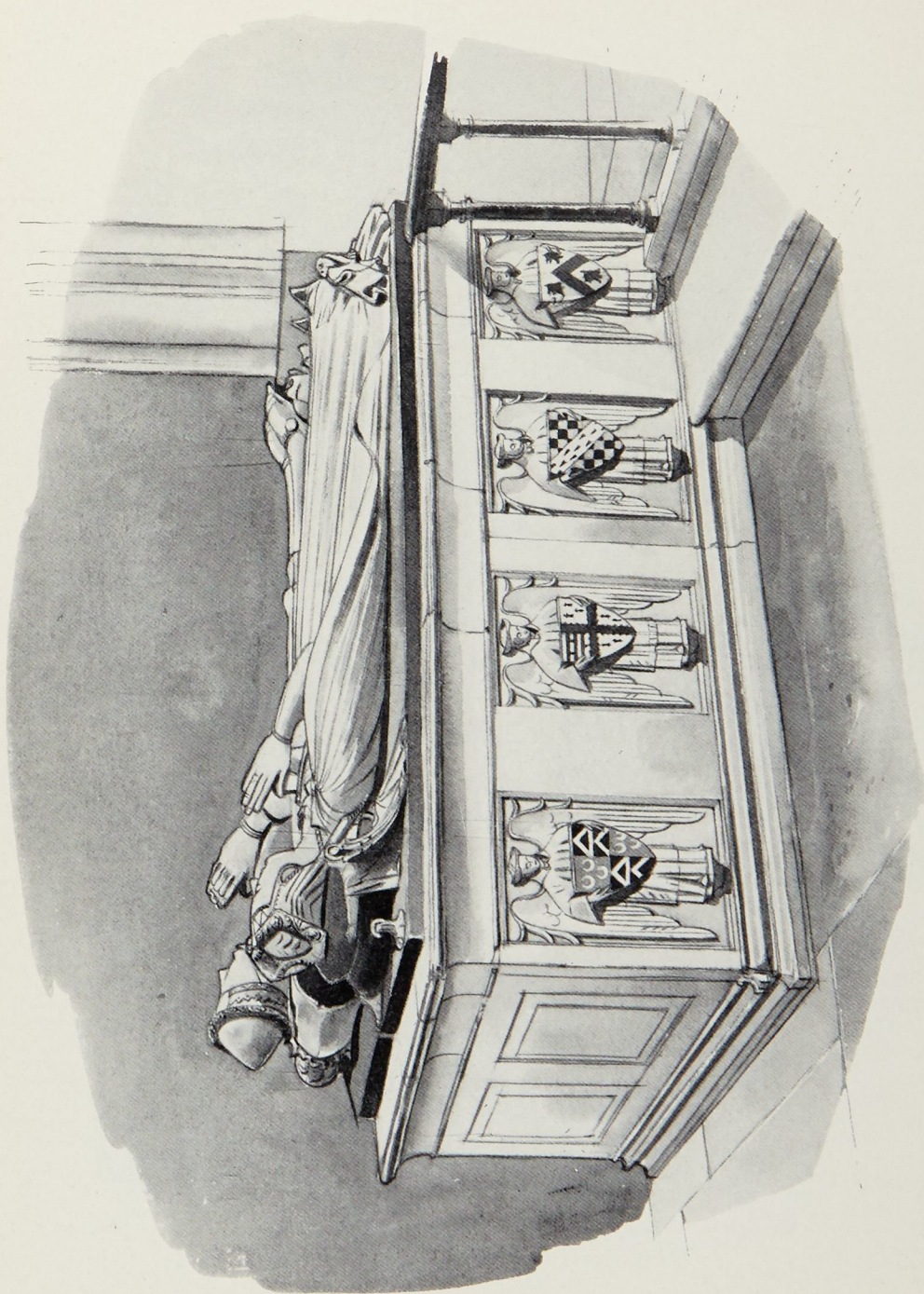


Plate I. Tomb of Sir Edmund de Thorp and his wife: Ashwellthorpe

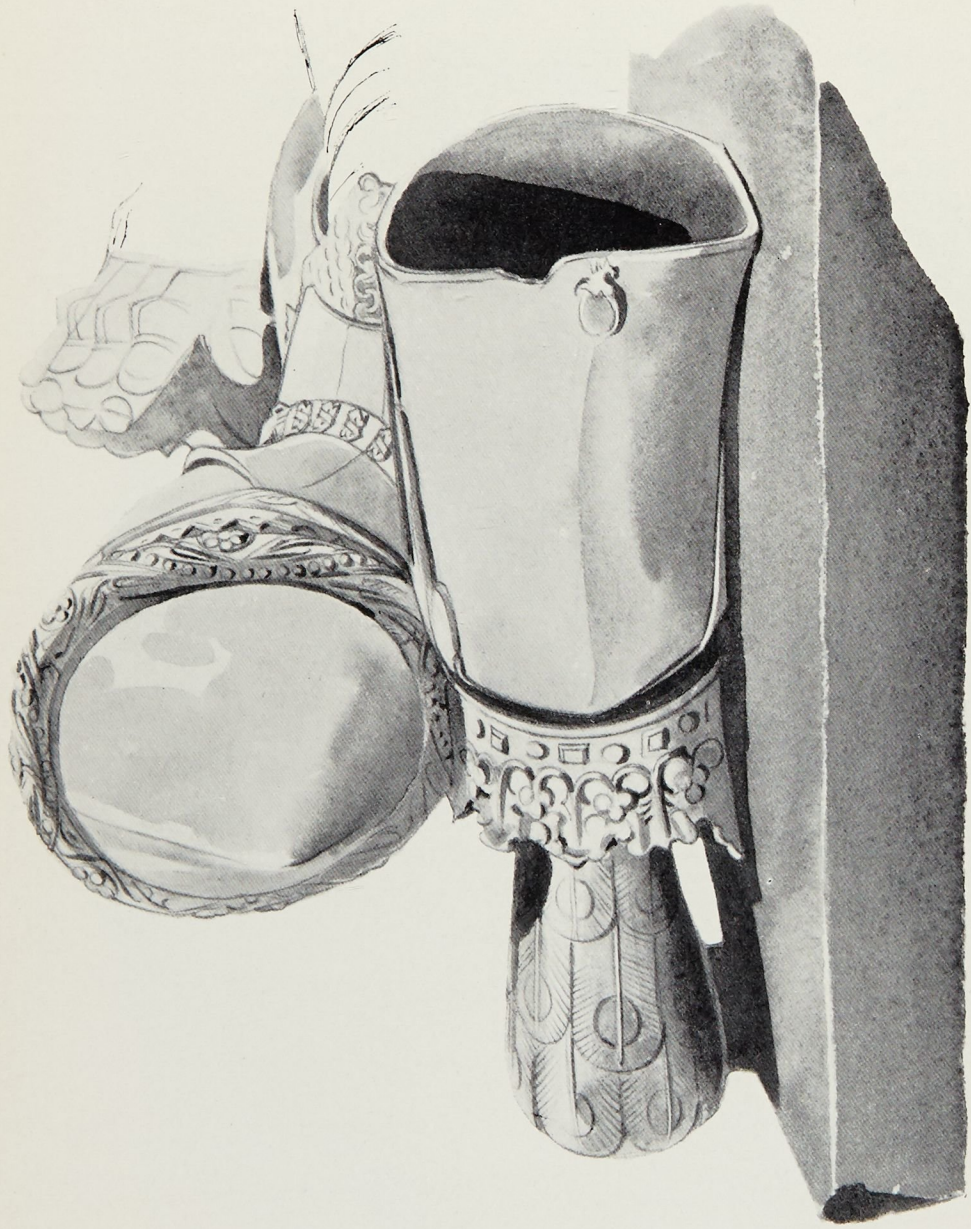


Plate II. Sir Edmund wearing bascinet and collar of Esses, his head resting on his tilting helm

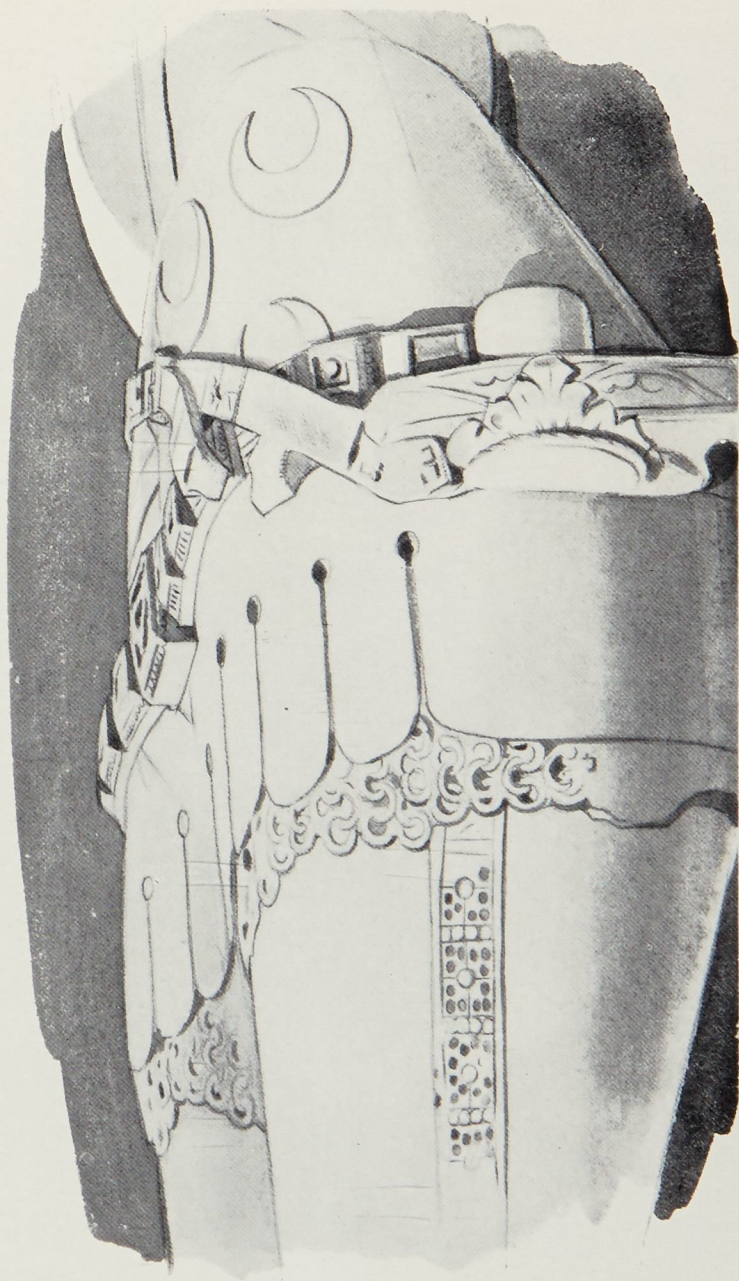


Plate III. Sir Edmund: leather jupon and "knighly girdle" over hauberk of chain mail: baldric and hilt of (lost) sword



Plate IV. Lady de Thorp: eagle clasp, collar of Esses, caul head-dress, angel supporting pillow

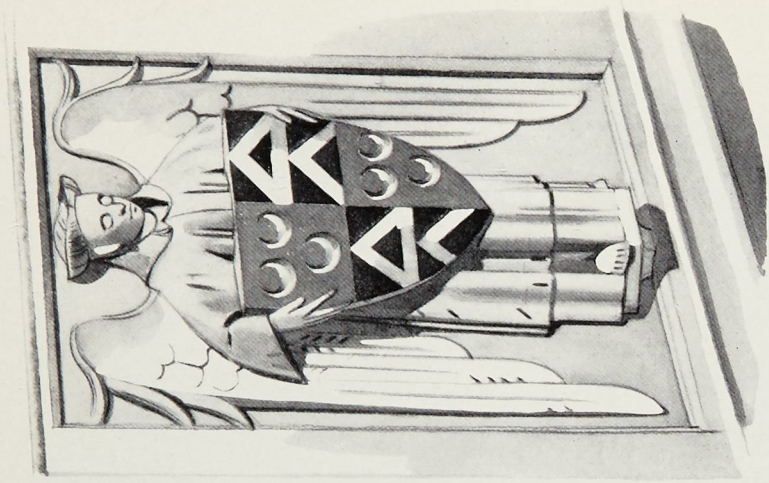


Plate V. Angel "weeper"; shield shows quarterly Thorp and Baynard

- (8) *Holland, Earl of Kent*—Quarterly, 1 and 4 azure three fleurs-de-lis argent, 2 and 3 gules three lions passant guardant or.

Farrer observes that the tomb must have been repainted since Blomefield's time, for in place of the last two coats Blomefield gives "Or, a lion rampant gules, armed and langued azure", and "Argent, two bars and a canton gules". The first of these seems to make no sense in the Thorp family; though Blomefield may have misread the tinctures, and rampant lions proliferate throughout heraldry. The second, according to Joan Corder,⁶ was borne by several East Anglian families, including Bois of Norfolk, Cufaude of Halesworth, Fuller of Bradwell (Ipswich), Giffard of Haverhill and Pipard of Hintlesham.

In coat No. 4 Blomefield gives *bears'* heads: this is correct for *Barrey*, and is probably a misprint in Farrer. What seems more probable is that it was originally "argent, a chevron between three *griffins'* heads erased gules"—*Tilney*, was misread by Blomefield and subsequently wrongly re-tinctured on the authority of his account.

The arms described in No. 8 were, of course, the arms of England from c. 1405 until 1603—*France modern quartering England*.

Blomefield says that "at his head an angel holds an inescutcheon of St. George; at her head the arms of France and England". These angels have been lost with the original west end of the tomb, and these two blazons are, as noted above, now on the north side.

The repainting, noted by Farrer as having been done since Blomefield described the tomb, was both clumsy and inaccurate. Through the generosity of the Pilgrim Trust the tomb was repaired and the shields were re-tinctured by a competent heraldic painter in the spring and early summer of 1967.

Alabaster is a massive form of the gypsum which for centuries has been quarried and burnt for the making of plaster. The best known quarries producing this material were at Chellaston in Nottinghamshire and at Tutbury in Derbyshire. Near the latter, in the parish church of Hanbury, is the earliest known effigy in alabaster, believed to commemorate Sir John de Hanbury who died in 1303. With legs crossed and hand on sword hilt, it is very much in the manner of contemporary effigies in stone.

A quarter of a century later this easily worked material had evidently come to the notice of the royal court, and of the Westminster school of carvers who had been working principally in Purbeck Marble and Caen stone. The beautiful effigy of the murdered Edward II (died 1327) in Gloucester Cathedral, and that of his son Prince John of Eltham (died 1344) in Westminster Abbey, are almost certainly London work. In both these cases the effigies and some other parts are of alabaster, but Purbeck Marble and other stones were used in the tomb chests and in the Gloucester canopy.⁷

If the London workshops had at first a monopoly in the production of effigies in alabaster, they did not retain it for more than a decade or two; for there is plenty of evidence that workshops were set up at or near the quarries.

By the 1380's many a country knight could order his tomb and effigy to be made in alabaster—either before or after his death (which makes the dating or ascription of effigies purely on evidence of costume and armour a not altogether reliable method).

All through the fifteenth century and well into the sixteenth, alabaster continued to be the most popular material for tombs and effigies. Because it is comparatively soft it could be carved into the most elaborate detail of chain mail, hinged plate armour, hairnets and pet dogs. As in the case of much late medieval work in the soft clunch of Cambridgeshire, technical virtuosity ultimately became an end in itself, and the whole was subordinated to its parts.

The colour of alabaster ranges from a clear milk white, through red-veined to an almost unbroken rose-red. It was the white which was evidently preferred so long as it lasted, which it seems to have done into the first quarter of the sixteenth century. As white blocks are still occasionally yielded from the deep underground mines near Tutbury, it can reasonably be assumed that it became more difficult and thus uneconomic to quarry, rather than that the supply was supposed to be exhausted.

The elaboration of detail in these effigies makes them an admirable field for a study of the development of costume and armour, from the simple chain mail and surcoat of the Hanbury knight to the over-elaborate and highly decorated armours of the later Tudor period. An interesting detail noted by Gardner is that up to about 1445 all effigies of knights are shown in various forms of the close fitting *bascinet*, whereas after 1455 all are bareheaded with the exception of a quite small number who wear the *salet*, a light fighting helmet with a long extension to cover the neck, which replaced the big and cumbrous tilting helm. Two good examples of this headwear are to be seen in the Dorset church of Melbury Sampford. Both these figures wear the fluted armour of the last quarter of the fifteenth century,—though one of them has been appropriated to the memory of a mid-sixteenth-century lord of the manor by the simple expedient of replacing the original brass-lettered inscription round the Purbeck Marble base by a new one.

Later developments in the design of tombs using alabaster can nowhere be better studied than in those of the de Roos and Manners families, tombs which have made a mausoleum of the chancel of Bottesford church in Leicestershire. Under the windows flanking the altar are the simple effigies of Sir William de Roos, *k.c.* (died 1414) and of his son John, Lord Roos, who survived him by only seven years. The rest of the fifteenth century is not represented; but Thomas Manners, first earl of Rutland (died 1543), is commemorated in a fine alabaster tomb by Richard Parker of Burton-upon-Trent. Simple and dignified in form yet rich in sculptured detail, it represents the last period in which the design of tombs seems to have been informed by good taste touched with humility.

In painful contrast is the tomb of the second earl (died 1563), in which the effigies of him and his countess lie under the representation of a typical Elizabethan table with hugely bulbous legs. In the words of the church guidebook

"this is a most singular tomb, and probably unique—indeed, it is to be hoped so"! It is, incidentally, all in the red-veined alabaster.

By the time the third earl died in 1587 a group of Netherlandish refugee sculptors, soon to be famous, had set up workshops at Southwark—to the great loss, no doubt, of the provincial workshops. The Manners family patronized Gerard Janssen (who later changed his name to Johnson) and his sons Nicholas and Gerard. The tombs of the third and fourth earls are by Gerard the elder, and are good examples of the products of these workshops—classical in detail, coloured with heraldic achievements prominently displayed. The tomb of the fifth earl (died 1612), by Nicholas Janssen, is coarser in both design and detail, and seems to anticipate the extravagant exhibitionism of that of the sixth earl (died 1632) which rears itself to such a great height that a blister had to be formed in the Chancel roof to accommodate its crowning feature.⁸

To fill the gap in the Bottesford collection one must either visit such groups of effigies as those at Macclesfield in Cheshire, Ashbourne in Derbyshire and Willoughby-in-the-Wolds in Nottinghamshire, or must seek out individual examples nearer at hand. Suffolk can offer two earls of Oxford (died 1370 and 1420) at Bures, Lord Bardolph, K.G. (died 1441) at Dennington, John de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk (died 1491) at Wingfield, and two very late fifteenth-century effigies of members of the Crane family at Chilton.

Very few records of the provenance of these tombs have survived; but there is fortunately a copy of one record which is of particular interest in considering the Thorp tomb at Ashwellthorpe. This is a contract for the tomb of Ralph Greene Esquire (died 1418) in the church at Lowick in Northamptonshire. The parties to the contract were on the one side the executors and Katherine the widow, and on the other side Thomas Prentys and Robert Sutton, *kersvers* of Chellaston, who undertook to set up the tomb before Easter 1420 for the sum of £40. Although very precise details of the effigies, the tomb chest and the canopy were laid down in the contract, there is no suggestion that there was to be any attempt at portraiture: "the counterfeit of an esquire armed at all points . . ." and "the counterfeit of a lady lying in her open surcoat with two angels holding a pillow under her head . . . and one of the said images holding the other by the hand".

The sides of this tomb have angels bearing shields; and these angels, with their stiff and rather spikey wings and their hair in a roll right across the head, are so like those on the Thorp tomb—and indeed on others at Ashbourne and elsewhere—that we need have little hesitation in ascribing the Ashwellthorpe tomb to a Chellaston workshop. Indeed, the similarities do not end with the angels, for the figures have both general style and detail in common, particularly in the head-dress of the ladies and in the enrichment on the armours.

Gardner says that "all the effigies were, of course, gorgeously coloured and gilded", and he blames the present almost universal lack of colour to time and the mis-spent zeal of restorers. I believe that, so far as the pre-Reformation effigies are concerned, this is a completely erroneous theory, probably derived largely from the beautifully coloured plates in Stothard's *Monumental effigies*

of *Great Britain*, published in 1817. In examining a considerable number of these effigies I have never found the smallest traces of paint anywhere except on such carved details as the orle, hip belt, sword hilt and scabbard and on the ladies' cushions, head-dresses and shoes. It is clear that the white alabaster was always preferred for effigies, so long as it was available; and it is only in the later sixteenth century, where uncoloured parts of the tombs are in the red-veined variety, that we find the effigies fully coloured. The "restorers" have been rightly blamed for many sins; but it is too much to believe that they can have carried out such widespread and complete removal of all colour from pre-Reformation alabaster effigies.

Recent careful cleaning of the Ashwellthorpe figures brought to light considerable traces of gilding and colour in the carved work about the heads of both knight and lady; but, as the mantling is painted red when it should be blue—the colour of the *field* of the Thorp arms—this may well be the work of the same heavy and uninformed hand as the nineteenth-century repainting of the shields.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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¹Arthur Gardner: *Alabaster tombs of the pre-Reformation period in England*. Cambridge University Press, 1940.

²There seems to be some uncertainty about the posture of the unicorn in the Harling arms. Corder (see note 6 below) records *rampant, salient, sejant* and *erect*. Papworth (*Ordinary of Arms* 1874) has only *sejant* and *climant*. Burke, *General Armory* 1884 also gives *sejant* and *climant*.

³Her second husband, Sir Robert Wingfield, gave the church its beautiful east window; both he and Sir William Chamberlain are depicted in the glass. The tomb of Anne and her first husband is on the north wall of the chancel.

⁴Rev. Edmund Farrer: *Church Heraldry of Norfolk*. Goose & Co., Norwich, 1885.

⁵He may also have worn a steel breastplate, over the mail *hauberk* and covered by the *jupon*.

⁶Joan Corder: "A dictionary of Suffolk Arms", *Suffolk Records Society*, 1965.

⁷There is a drawing of the lost canopy of Prince John's tomb in F. H. Crossley's *English Church Monuments*, 1150–1550. Batsford, 1921.

⁸This tomb has historical interest in the fact that it is the only known tomb which carries an inscription alleging death (of the earl's two infant sons) by "wicked practice and sorcery".